DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 153 SO 032 032

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TITLE The Making of Dolls and Figurative Clay Sculpture among Black Indigenous People of South Africa.
INSTITUTION Australian Inst. of Art Education, Melbourne.
PUB DATE 1999-09-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual World Congress of the International Society for Education through Art (InSEA). (30th, Brisbane, Australia, September 21-26, 1999). Paper assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council for the Arts.
AVAILABLE FROM Australian Inst. of Art Education, Melbourne., C/Suite 125, 283 Glenhuntley Road, Eisternwick, VIC, 3185, Australia.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *African Culture; *Blacks; *Clay; Commur[illegible] Involvement; Creative Expression; Foreign Countries; *Indigenous Populations; Informal Education; *Sculpture
IDENTIFIERS Artifacts; *Dolls; South Africa

ABSTRACT

Among African cultures, the creative process is regarded as the most important because it is usually done jointly as a culturally shared communal activity. For Africans, art is normally functional and the artifacts carry more meaning when they are in use. This paper focuses on the communal making of art, rather than just the aesthetic appreciation of artifacts, in an effort to highlight this activity as an important social phenomenon among African people. The paper presents the author's own experience of making and playing with these artifacts, followed by an analysis of the interpretation of this process by other authors. It concludes with some speculations about the cultural, personal, and educational effects of the loss of this cultural activity among the present generation of the Nguni young people to which the author belongs. (BT)

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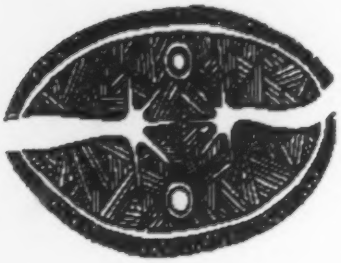

InSEA

"The Making of Dolls and Figurative Clay Sculpture Among Black Indigenous People of South Africa"

by

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Proceedings from the InSEA 30th World Congress "Cultures and Transitions"

21-26 September 1999
Brisbane Australia

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THE MAKING OF DOLLS AND FIGURATIVE CLAY SCULPTURE AMONG BLACK INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Among African cultures the creative process is regarded the most important because it is usually done jointly as a culturally shared communal activity. For Africans arts is normally functional and the artefacts carry more meaning when they are in use. In this paper I will focus on the communal making of arts rather than just the aesthetic appreciation of the artefacts, in an effort to highlight this activity as an important social phenomenon among African people.

The main thesis I will discuss here is the making of artefacts (toys) mainly by children as a learning process that develops their creative abilities and mental growth. Further, that playing with these artefacts traditionally acts as means of enculturation of African children into their tribal communities. First, I will present my experience of making and playing with these artefacts, followed by an analysis of the interpretation of this process by other authors. I will then conclude with some speculations on the cultural, personal and educational effects of the loss of this cultural activity amongst the present generation of the Nguni young people to which I belong.

Art and Artmaking in South African communities

In Africa creative arts has always been a way of community life, and its making and appreciation are spontaneous cultural activity, be it music, dance, drama, visual arts or crafts. Among African people, education through art has been the main method of transmitting cultural traditions from generation to generation. This involves designing and performing music, dance, drama and folklore. Visual arts and crafts form an integral part of their lives because they make their musical instruments, utensils and build their homes. Children are exposed to these activities from a very early age.

In most cultures especially western cultures, aesthetic appreciation of artefacts is the most accessible activity to the audience and usually the most important. This is due to the fact that art

making fulfils the individual's emotional and spiritual needs which are meaningful only to the creator. The artist's experience is very significant because it increases the skills in manipulation of the whole creative process and expands the knowledge not only as an artist but as a member of a cultural group. In other words the creator's knowledge as an artist and as a members of a cultural group develops with the production of art works. Lowenfeld (1970) asserts, "The very act of creating can provide new insights and new knowledge for further action. Probably the best preparation for creating is the act of creation itself". Creative arts are mainly influenced by the artist's culture, and the basic cultural characteristics are always prominent throughout the art work. Costal (1985) states, "it is not only communication by means of pictures (artefacts), but the very process of the art work production which must be understood as a social phenomenon". My intention is to try to unearth the important cultural values and beliefs embedded in the art production process.

As young girls we were taught by our mothers or older sisters to make and play with dolls or puppets. We were taught to sew, knit, crotchet and make clothes for our dolls. While we developed pleasure in making these dolls, we taught our younger sisters to make theirs and also constructed homes for these dolls to live. On the other hand our brothers modelled and carved small figurative sculptures of animals as they herded the domestic animals in the fields. In both cases these girls' and boys' basic creative abilities and intellectual growth such as constructive thinking, imagination, self expression, self identity, initiative, perceptual abilities, intuition, sympathetic understanding and so on develop through the making of these artefacts. As this process continues the skills and intellectual abilities refine with age and through continuous production.

Through using bits and pieces of materials and putting them together, a child combines different elements of his experience to produce a unique and meaningful piece of work irrespective of the amount of knowledge they have at the time of production. For instance the first method of doll making we learnt was to use a 'Y' shaped stick with the two arms used as legs and the bottom part of 'Y' as a head. We made a head by stuffing a square piece of fabric with rags or cotton wool and attaching it by inserting the bottom part of 'Y' stick in the head and tying it with a string or rag cut into a string. A straight piece of stick is attached just below the head horizontally to make arms and then the whole stick figure is wrapped tightly with rags to make flesh.

This method is the basic one which is usually taught to little girls, from the age of two. The process starts with wanting to own a doll as an assimilation of a bond between mother and a child. Before you start making your own doll, you have to use your imagination of what you are going to need and have an idea of how you want your doll or baby to look like. This is a very good start because at a very early age a child can express her needs and figure out how to make them real. The whole process encourages peer education, support and bonding.

There are usually two main recognisable stages that these girls and boys go through in their creative and mental growth. The first stage starts from the age of two to about the age of eleven. During this stage boys and girls from the age of two play together around their homes usually under the care of their elder sisters. Young girls at the age of twelve begin to share household responsibilities with their mothers and the first duty is usually to mind their younger brothers and sisters while the mothers take care of other duties.

The young boys on the other hand model and carve animals in which they are interested as they carry out their duty as herd boys. The animals vary from the cattle, horses and donkeys that belong to their fathers to the wild animals and birds that they hunt and feast on. The process starts with searching for clay and wood and hunting for wild animal, fruits, vegetables and birds. Through peer education these young boys learn to be in contact with their immediate environment, which is a complete involvement in basic sensory experiences. In Nguni culture for instance, cattle are described and named by their colours which are derived from resemblance to nature. For example 'green' (iluhlaza) is used to describe everything with a touch of blue, and

specified by associating with environmental objects, such as 'green as the grass in spring or green as the sky on a cloudless day or green as peacock and so on. Brown is described as 'dirt' because it is associated with the soil that makes one dirty.

Every herd boy is expected to know the names as well as the functions of the cattle because they have different cultural uses and the colours play a major role in identifying them. A cow or an ox called 'Umzondo' that resembles the 'skunk', which is black with a white stripe and a bushy tail and which is not used for dowry (lobola).1 It is believed that the bride will adopt the hatred shared by people of the bad smell that is produced by the skunk and therefore the marriage will not last.

This example combines various sensory experiences and intellectual developments, starting with knowing the skunk, how it looks, smells or probably how its fur feels when you touch it. Then recognising the cow or ox and associating it with all these characteristics and their cultural meaning. Therefore, for these young boys and girls creative processes involve a body of knowledge that does not only start and end with creating, but comes from an interaction with the environment and their cultural beliefs.

Stages of Toymaking and play in Traditional Community Settings

The creative processes that dominate this first stage are, scribbling on the ground or on walls or any other surface available with their fingers or stones or sticks, and singing and dancing together by imitating their parents and other members of the community. From this early age children begin to interact with their environment. Various activities go along together. I would like to focus on the 'play house' (poppy huis).2 The play house is where girls and boys between the ages of two and twelve play together reflecting on their relationships mainly with their mothers, due to the immediacy of maternal contact, the fathers being out of the house during the day. The making of dolls and playing with them is an assimilation of the mother and the child. The playing process involves role play, young boys take the role of fathers, while the girls are mothers and the dolls play the part of children. At this stage boys and girls all participate in doll making or sometimes the division of labour begins depending on the interest of the child. Some boys identify with their father's duties which are to make furniture and build the houses. This is a very important learning stage because although everything is done in a playful manner, children begin to learn the basic cultural values, such as sharing and living together harmoniously. The children display almost everything that their parents do and start questioning about why things are done the way they are and so on. This is the beginning of the enculturation of children through play.

The next stage begins at about the age of twelve when the children are expected to be mature enough to be trusted with more responsible duties. The boys are given the duty as herd boys and the girls assume constructive household chores such as minding their younger brothers and sisters, cooking, fetching water from the river and so on. The girls continue making dolls, but most of their time is occupied with making functional arts and crafts like weaving, basketry, pottery, beadwork and so on. The boys continue making art to fulfil their personal needs, but the artifacts produced are more detailed. This stage continues until about the age of fifteen when they enter the initiation school, which marks the end of the boyhood to the beginning of the manhood. As young men they begin to make more functional work, such as musical instruments, architecture and many other artistic objects. During the initiation stage, education through art is more formal and is done by an adult and integrated with the cultural values and beliefs. Likewise the girls at the age of fifteen attend initiation school called (intonjane) where young girls under the supervision of an elderly women are taught the facts of life. Beadwork, pottery and other crafts occupy the major part of this stage and this stage continues until the girls are ready for marriage.

The two main stages described previously pertain to the subject matter and the cultural activities of the African people, as these both play a major role in the enculturation process. Lowenfeld (1970) identified seven components of growth that education through art is capable of arousing. These are emotional growth, intellectual growth, physical growth, perceptual growth, social

growth, aesthetic growth and creative growth. Children reflect their emotions through playing and interacting with the environment and with their peers. The role play in the play house provides a good climate for an emotional release as it allows them to express their feeling and self identity. Intellectual growth is enhanced through the use of different senses in making and playing with the artifacts. The whole process of making and playing with these artefacts encourages all the growth components that Lowenfeld had identified. Children perceptual abilities and social growth develop with the use of different senses through integrating knowledge of their immediate environment with cultural beliefs. Creative processes provide growth among children because it increases their manipulative skills in handling the materials and broaden their general knowledge.

There are several authors who have conducted studies on this topic, all with different outcomes. Frank Jollies (1994) documented the development of dolls and described them as beaded objects, because of the elaborate beadwork that these particular ones are dressed. He traced their economic background and their cultural antecedents, through the work of a group of women from one of the Nguni tribes. He argued that the rapid development of this unprecedented mode of expression is not only related to technical and market-related factors, but also represents on a rural level the growth of cultural awareness. He also stated that when viewed as a symptom of widespread feeling that the function and values of traditional society are under threat, the dolls are no longer purely decorative artifacts but documents of the social processes of their time.

Jollies described these dolls and animals as an 'unprecedented mode of expression', probably because they are being viewed as creative art objects for the first time. These artifacts have been made by African children as early as the first settlement, but may have not had the same aesthetic appeal as those made by adults and also no studies were ever conducted hence he uses the term 'unprecedented'. One of the reasons maybe that dolls and animals made by children serves as toys and usually would be difficult to collect for viewing as they are sometimes destroyed after playing or left at the play place. His argument that these artefacts represents 'the growth of cultural awareness' I fully agree with this view, because whether these artifact are made by children as toys or by adults as art, in both cases they depict the cultural values of the artists who make them. The dolls that Jollies studied reveal cultural values of the Nguni people through their attires that are associated with different social roles.

Ian Calder (1995) conducted a survey of trends in the collection of Zulu ceramics in six of the major museums in Kwazulu-Natal regior. of South Africa, and among these were figurative clay sculpture made by children. He described the clay sculpture of animals made by herd boys as 'representing a rustic, unspoilt way of life'. He further states that this figurative sculpture was originally a gender-specific activity practised by males. Calder is again confirming the integration of creative arts with cultural values and beliefs among the African people which has been the major function of their arts.

Most of the authors who have written about the making of toys among African children have stressed their aesthetic appeal and only a little has been said about the effect of this creative process on the creators. Art creation is a complex process whereby the artist communicates through the work, acquires experience through the art production and fulfils his aesthetic needs. Wollheim (1987) argued that if we are to understand an artifact when it is practiced as an art we have to start from the perspective of the creator. The essence of my discussion is to explore the perspective of the creator among these children, understand the educational aspects embedded in the whole process as an insider and consequently enrich my knowledge as an art educator.

Toymaking and play as a Carrier of Cultural Values and Beliefs

Art making and playing moulds a child to be an accepted member of a traditional society, because he/she learns through it basic social values that make him/her what he/she ought to be in a particular society. Among other things a child learns to think and act creatively, to be sympathetic,

to develop sentimental attachment to certain people and objects and identifies him/ herself with certain values. When observing today's South African children through my own and others that I am in contact with, these important aspects are not as strong as before. The present socioeconomic state of the community places more emphasis on playing with ready made toys than on children making their own. There is not much to make because play car, dolls, play houses, clothes and play furniture can be purchased. Children do not value these toys because they know they can still get new ones if they get lost or old and they do not aspire to create their own.

The rich cultural values that existed among Africans which were mainly achieved through the direct contact with the environment no longer exist. The commonsense knowledge is only limited to the home and school surroundings as opposed to the wild-life which the earlier generation were interacting with. The African language structure has been weakened and the original African folklore no longer exists. The rich sensory awareness which was acquired through the exposure to wild-life has been lost. The major problem is that this valuable method of education does not seem to have an alternative and the present generation is lost without these traditional ways of forming identities. The multicultural society today does not seem to present a better method of general education for channelling creativity.

South African society is in transition. At the moment this is translated within the community as confusion about cultural place, identity and traditions. These are proving difficult for the community and the educational system to address. Alternative educational processes which offer the same kinds of experiences and benefits formerly gained by young children through toymaking are urgently needed to foster this mode of life in today's children. It the experience of many cultural groups to respond to changes by suppressing or denying their traditional values when faced with momentous transitions such as those being experienced in the Republic of South Africa at present. However, it is not until the means to re-assimilate original traditions are agreed upon, that a community can move forward, confident of meeting new challenges without losing identity, through coherence and respect for past values.

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